The Advocates

This program was broadcast live from the National Press Club, Washington, May 10, 1970, on a weekend that saw teargas used heavily in the streets of the Capitol to disperse the several hundred thousand students, from all parts of the country, gathered spontaneously to protest the Cambodian invasion and the Kent State killings. Some of them were in the audience on that Sunday night.

The day before, I had spoken at my first teach-in against the war at Washington University, St. Louis, and the following week I testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I had left the employ of the Rand Corporation on April 15.

Topic: Should Congress resolve that the President immediately withdraw all troops, aid, and advisors from Cambodia and commit no further forces outside Vietnam?

Participants: Advocate Howard Miller (pro)
Senator Charles Goodell (R-N.Y.)
Daniel Ellsberg, Ph.D., Center for International Studies, MIT; former advisor to the State and Defense departments.

Advocate William T. King (con)
Senator Robert Dole (R-Kans.)
William H. Sullivan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, East Asian and Pacific Affairs; former U.S. Ambassador to Laos.

Moderator: Victor Palmieri

PALMIERI: Mr. Ellsberg, welcome to "The Advocates." (Applause.)

MILLER: Mr. Ellsberg is now at MIT and for the past several years has been engaged in a study about the Presidential decision-making in a crisis, especially as it relates to Vietnam. He is a former company commander of the Marine Corps, and also has a Ph. D from Harvard. Three years ago, he was in Vietnam observing military operations there.

Within the past two years, he has been a consultant to the State Department, Defense Department and White House on Presidential decision-making. And tonight, he is here to tell us why Congress must mandate withdrawal from Cambodia and Southeast Asia.

Mr. Ellsberg, the President says that the operation into Cambodia was necessary to save American lives. Is it worth-while for that purpose?

DR. DANIEL ELLSBERG: This operation is likely, tragically, far more likely to cost many American lives, Vietnamese lives, and Cambodian lives. I believe this operation in terms of the arms and rice that have been captured so far that has led the military to define as "success" is not worth the 64 American lives it already cost, 68 with Kent State.

MILLER: You say it's not worth the lives; is there any justification for it?

ELLSBERG: I think the reasons against it now are pretty much the same as they have been for the last five years, the same low margin of benefits, the same risks, the same costs that have led two Presidents, including this one, to reject the proposal to enter those sanctuaries, the Laotian sanctuaries with U. S. troops every time that proposal has been raised in the last five years.

MILLER: You talk about the lack of benefits, Mr. Ellsberg. What is the risk?

ELLSBERG: The risks are very serious. First, of escalation by the other side to match ours. That has been the pattern of each exchange of initiatives in the last ten years, one could say. Each time that we have tried to win the war quickly, to bring military victory closer to us, or simply to avoid defeat, the other side has seen fit to take the effort, take the casualties, take the cost to do whatever is necessary to stalemate ~~and reduce that response~~ neutralize.

In this particular case, I think there are serious likelihoods that the Communists will now be led to change what the Administration has led us to believe -- and I think correctly -- has been their military strategy for some time up till now, a protracted war, a wait-and-see attitude along with the American public to see if he, the President, does mean in fact to carry out this total withdrawal that he is hinting at but not committed himself to....

~~If I may go on for a moment --~~

~~PALMIERI: Just one more minute, then I want to get into cross-examination.~~

MILLER: Let me ask just one more question. Are there risks in the Presidential decision-making here that may require in fact that Congress mandate withdrawal from all of Southeast Asia?

ELLSBERG: The risks of escalation by Presidential action

are the same here as in the past; the risk of addiction to continued endless war, open-ended war, a return not to the Vietnamization policy that we believe was ~~taken~~ irreversibly east toward home, but to a policy that seems to be taking us west into Cambodia and possibly yet north into Laos and North Vietnam.

MILLER: Thank you, Mr. Ellsberg.

PALMIERI: Mr. King, let's hear from you on cross-examination.

KING: Mr. Ellsberg, you are no longer with the United States Government; is that correct?

ELLSBERG: That is correct.

KING: Have you been briefed on the build-up in the Cambodian sanctuary area?

ELLSBERG: No, sir; but of course no argument we have been told by our President or any other representative of the government leads me to believe that any evidence is available, arguments are available, different from what we have heard for the last five days.

KING: In other words, you do not believe that there has been a build-up of supplies and men in the Cambodian sanctuary area in the last few weeks?

ELLSBERG: We have heard assertions to that effect; we have seen no scrap of evidence, even in the form of the estimates so often proved wrong in the past, of the nature of that build-up. I do not believe, Mr. King, that there has been any such build-up in those sanctuaries or that any evidence exists.

KING: You do not believe the President when he says that there was such a build-up?

ELLSBERG: I can imagine the President believes that. I have, Mr. King, participated in many military briefings, in preparing them in the last ten years, in giving them. I read many of them. I can believe he believes that, but I would not advise him to have a great deal of confidence in it.

KING: You mean you feel that the President of the United States has been brainwashed?

ELLSBERG: Presidential candidates have admitted to that in the past. I believe, as a matter of fact, sir, that

five Presidents have brainwashed themselves, brainwashed their own staffs, and brainwashed the American public for a number of Administrations.

KING: You don't like the --

ELLSBERG: We had a generation of that.

KING: You don't like the government in South Vietnam, do you?

ELLSBERG: That seems to be a strange question, Mr. King. I am not --

PALMIERI: I don't think he meant it as a point of personal affection, asking you whether in fact you are antipathetic to the Government of South Vietnam.

ELLSBERG: I believe the Government of South Vietnam is a narrow, unrepresentative, corrupt, military dictatorship. (Laughter and applause.)

If I may add, what is more relevant to its association with the United States?

PALMIERI: I suspected that he had an answer to that question, Mr. King.

ELLSBERG: I believe it consists of a narrow group in South Vietnam, that alone, perhaps along with some communists, prefers to see this war continue indefinitely than to see it end with American withdrawal.

KING: Well, let me ask you how you feel about the Government of North Vietnam?

ELLSBERG: The Government of North Vietnam is in many respects ... not any better than the Government of South Vietnam.

KING: In other words, you don't care which government wins; is that right?

ELLSBERG: The notion that it is for an American, whether it is me or you or the President of the United States, to determine the Government of South Vietnam, is a tragic mistake that has led to tragedy for both countries.

KING: Well, how do you feel about the people of South Vietnam?

ELLSBERG: I feel a great deal for the people of South

Vietnam. That is what led me to go there. I think that a communist victory, which may well happen with the policy that I would like to see take place, would punish and subject to exile, death, imprisonment, some of my closest friends in the world, precisely because they are nationalist rivals to communist leadership; patriots, men of integrity of the sort now imprisoned by the present Saigon Government.

PALMIERI: Let me interrupt you a second.

ELLSBERG: Let me speak specifically of my friend, ~~Chun Yup Chou~~ Tran Ngoc Chau, unconstitutionally imprisoned by this government recently with the tacit approval of our present ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker.

PALMIERI: Mr. Ellsberg, let me ask you this: Granting your strong feelings about the government and the basis for your opinion, isn't the question that we have here whether we are going to substitute the judgment of Congress for the judgment of the Commander-in-Chief? Isn't it that simple?

ELLSBERG: It would be very regrettable if it were the case, that one has to substitute. I would like to see Congress share that responsibility, as the Constitution suggests it should. I believe it has shirked its responsibilities in the past to do that.

PALMIERI: Aren't we talking about command responsibility here? This was a question of protecting men in the field, was it not? Is it meant that the Constitution should have that responsibility shared with Congress?

ELLSBERG: The argument that this protects men in the field -- if we had time to answer it -- I think on quite technical grounds and grounds of experience, is almost a ludicrous argument. It cannot stand up under analysis and examination. There may well be other secret, clever motives of the sort that have led us to so many terrible, terribly mistaken policies in the past that led the President this way.

I would like to add, if I may, I think the record of our last five Presidents of both parties does not encourage us to give the benefit of the doubt to the President in Indochina. A President who wants the confidence of the people of this country, ~~through~~ his decisions would do well not to leave so many doubts and uncertainties as the President has done in this case.

PALMIERI: But presumably legislative matters such as the

Gulf of Tonkin resolution would not give you similar confidence or any greater confidence in Congress?

Mr. King, why don't you continue with Mr. Ellsberg. You have one more question?

KING: Do you feel that if we withdrew today from South Vietnam that the North Vietnamese would not overrun South Vietnam?

ELLSBERG: I believe they would not. I have more confidence than your question suggests in the military capability of the million men that we have armed in South Vietnam to protect themselves and to protect the cities of South Vietnam.

KING: In other words, you feel that we have done a good job in developing the South Vietnamese army?

ELLSBERG: No, I believe they have attained that capability in spite of our involvement.

KING: Thank you very much.

PALMIERI: Thank you very much, Mr. Ellsberg. (Applause.)